INSIGHT SERIES

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February, 2025

17th Century building foundations and surfaces in Plymouth

How do Archaeological Deposits Form?

In this, the second part of our archaeology series, we explore how archaeological sites are created and why archaeology may be preserved. While this process is a subject for academic study, it is also of practical importance for planning and development. Understanding how and where archaeological remains might be preserved helps predict potential archaeological risks.

Soil layers below demolished brick structures and modern surface

Archaeology is the study of physical remains of past human activities. These remains, known as archaeological deposits, are created by the actions of people in the past; such as waste disposal, the building of structures, burial practices, and agricultural work.

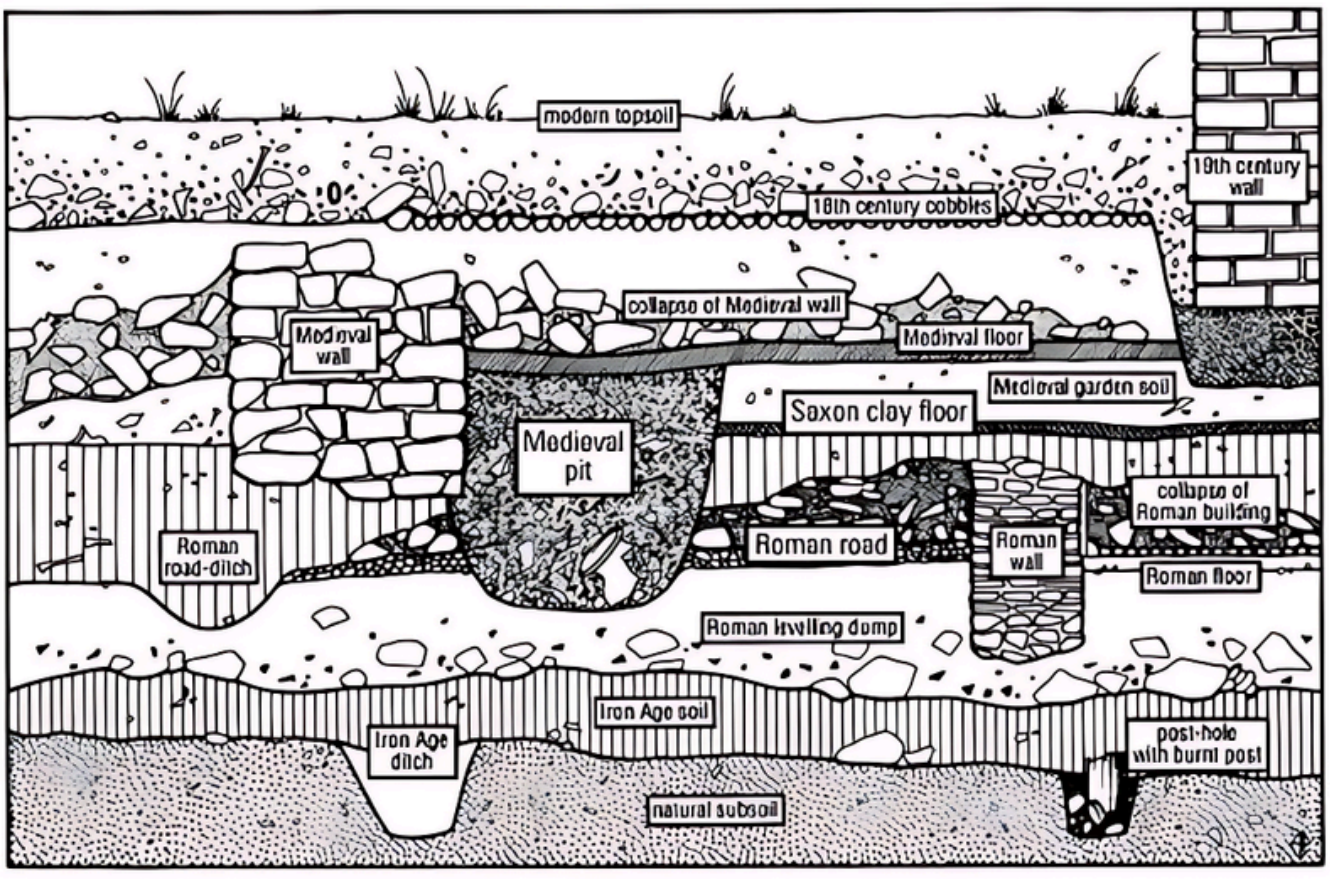
Many of these activities involve digging into the ground—whether it's for waste pits, building foundations, or ditches to mark land or build defences. These actions create layers or "deposits" of material, such as waste in a pit or rubbish discarded in a layer, an earth floor in a building, or the remains of a furnace or oven. When buildings are demolished, the rubble may be spread out to level the ground.

There are countless examples, but the key point is that most human activities leave behind some physical traces.

These human activities take place over time, alongside natural processes that also create or affect deposits. For example, wind, rivers, floods, and gravity can shape deposits, whilst plants and microorganisms can create new layers through soil formation. The natural decay of materials is another important factor, and it can be influenced by local conditions like water levels or soil acidity.

The archaeological record we find today is the result of both human and natural actions over long periods. This process creates something archaeologists call "stratigraphy". Stratigraphy is made up of the deposits that build up, or are created over time. Equally, these deposits can be removed or eroded during the process. By studying this stratigraphy, we can piece together the events that led to its formation.

In cities, stratigraphy can be complicated, with multiple layers of building, destruction, and rebuilding. This can create deep layers, where older features are buried under newer ones. In rural areas, the stratigraphy can be much shallower, often archaeological features are simply buried by a layer of agricultural soil created by ploughing.



The study of how archaeological sites form is complex, and there are many textbooks that dive deeper into this subject. The expertise of archaeologists is to pick apart this three-dimensional physical puzzle and add in the additional dimension of time to create a story that fits the evidence and can be related to a broader picture of history and pre-history.

These concepts of site formation can help in a development context, to assess the potential of a site to contain archaeology that may be a significant project risk. Thinking about how many phases of human activity might be present, the types of features that might have been created, whether recent activity has removed deposits and the natural processes at work, are all useful factors which may affect how deeply buried the archaeology is, how complex, and how well preserved some materials will be.

These factors will affect how we view the significance of the archaeology on a site, the scope of any archaeological work that may be required and the likely costs associated with it.

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